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# The Nouvelle Vague: Two Views from Paris

*In the following pages we present two articles on the "new wave" of young French film-makers, whose reputations have already reached the United States, but whose films are only beginning to be seen here. These men include Alexandre Astruc, Marcel Camus, Claude Chabrol, Georges Franju, Marcel Hanoun, Louis Malle, Jean-Daniel Pollet, Alain Resnais, Jacques Rivette, François Truffaut, and Roger Vadim—though their roles in the "movement" are subject to a good deal of discussion. The two articles differ markedly in their basic assumptions and their evaluations of the intentions and merits of these film-makers. We present them both in the hope that, as the films themselves become available here, a useful critical debate will ensue. In our next issue we plan to run detailed reviews of several of them which are now entering the theaters in this country. Neither article represents the opinion of the journal's editors, who await these much-heralded films with great interest, and are likely to arrive at still another position on them.*

## An Escapist Realism

EUGEN WEBER

*La Nouvelle Vague?* said a friend about their films. *Vous n'allez pas vous marrer.* He was right. There is nothing gay about them, they are not much fun, yet they cling to mind and one returns to them, to dress down the director for a slip, to wonder what he could have meant at a certain point, to interpret for the umpteenth time motives and gestures and shots that remain illogical, unexplained and open, as they so often do in life.

What is the *Nouvelle Vague*? It is the name a Parisian weekly, *l'Express*, has given to those young directors who in the last few years produced, usually with little money and a lot of independence, films without (or usually with-

out) stars, films moreover which were well received by the public. The list is a varied one; the newcomers, generally in their thirties, are not as new as all that (some of them have made documentaries in the past, some of them came up as cameramen or assistants), and their films of the last five years run the gamut from detective, adventure or horror stories (Franju, Malle), through romantic love (Camus, Malle) and social realism (Chabrol, Truffaut), to the most delicately brutal essays in a new cinematography (Resnais).

The contents of their films are generally their most negligible part. It is the construction, the treatment, that counts. Thus, Astruc's badly

entitled *Mauvaises Rencontres* is the banal story of a young woman come to Paris from the provinces to make a career. Questioned by the police about an alleged abortion, she recalls in a series of flashbacks the men she met in the process: the failure she was sorry for, the successful one whom she loved and lost, the lost dog she befriended and helped, the world-weary doctor who helped her and to whose death she would contribute. A thin script, rather uncomfortably interpreted by Anouk Aymée, Jean-Claude Pascal and Claude Dauphin, leaves one with little beyond the impression that the girl was a bit of an ass and that society (is it not significant that society always expresses itself through the police?) is an even bigger ass for interfering with a woman's right to choose whether she wants to be a mother or not. But this is not Astruc's purpose. All he tries to do is to tell the story from the inside rather than from the usual omniscient outsider's point of view. Interior monologue replaces dialogue as often as possible and serves to link the various scenes, the spectator knowing no more about what goes on next door than the central figure herself. In spite of its rather commonplace techniques, muddy though interesting photography, and moralizing assumptions, or perhaps because of them, this unintelligent film won a prize at Venice in 1955. But Astruc's work is the least interesting of the group. I mention it because some still think of him as the first of the few. The first, not the best.

Things, however, soon improved and whatever else might be adduced against the works that followed, lack of intelligence cannot. Camus took a long time in Brazil to translate the Orpheus myth into a story of love and death during the Rio carnival. Orfeu, a tram conductor, and Eurydice, a peasant girl, both beautiful, both young, meet, love, and lose each other when she dies pursued by a mysterious figure of death. Orfeu, stunned and unbelieving at his loss, seeks her through hospitals and police stations, in empty offices where piles of lifeless papers stare him down, through the hell of a voodoo-like ritual in which he thinks to hear her voice and, finally, in the morgue where he finds

her body. In the dawn, past the sweepers that wash away the remains of carnival, he carries her back toward his shack above the bay of Rio, is hit by a rock from the hand of an abandoned mistress, and falls over the cliff to his death. But his beloved guitar passes to a little boy and, as Orfeu and Eurydice lie reunited once more in death, the boy strums to make the sun rise upon another day.

It cannot have been easy to tie together Orpheus myth and Rio carnival in something more than just another thinly disguised travelogue. And Camus' work is far from perfect. But while the symbolism seems sometimes limp and sometimes too farfetched, the film remains remarkable for its poetic beauty. Without poetic license, without the willing suspension of disbelief, without surrender to the magic that Camus' images wield even when they wield it imperfectly, some scenes might seem senseless and others overdone. Fairy tales are not for the skeptic, but to my taste the failures of this romantic fairy tale are only those that await us all when we try to invent and interpret the uncommunicable.

In a way, Louis Malle may be said to have succeeded better than Camus when he chose to interpret love more summarily, less allegorically, in *Les Amants*, even though the film suggests an allegory. It is not hard to see why this beautiful and simple tale has caused shock and indignation, not only in professionally virtuous circles but also among more literate and broad-minded people whose romantic sympathies tend to be shocked by its matter-of-fact amorality. The heroine is a rich little provincial goose (well played by Jeanne Moreau). Dissatisfied with a husband too intelligent, too taciturn and too preoccupied for her (Alain Cuny), she seeks something better in Paris, where her girl friend's parties and the attentions of a polo-playing lover seem to provide occupation but without satisfaction. The husband, suddenly suspicious of her long and repeated absences from home, insists on inviting both her girl friend and the man he thinks to be her lover for a week end in their house. Unable to avoid this unpleasant situation, she drives back from Paris to host the odd

LES AMANTS:  
Judith Magre,  
Jeanne Moreau,  
and Jose-Luis  
de Villalonga.



party, her car breaks down on the way, and a young man in a small, tinny Citroën gives her a lift home. Her husband invites him to stay the night. It is summer. After dinner, in the garden, in the moonlight, the two almost-strangers meet, talk, touch, and love. They spend the night in her room (the love scenes there have received much comment—some passionate, some merely intrigued) and, at dawn, they depart in the young man's tinny little car, leaving behind her infant daughter, her husband, her lover and her life, in a magnificent and romantic *coup-de-tête*.

As with *Orfeu*, my account here concerns the surface of the plot, not its substance—which is elusive—or its subtleties—which are many. The film could have been scabrous; it is simply beautiful. Dialogue is almost nonexistent: it is replaced by the very haunting music of Brahms (from the Third Concerto for Cello and Violin), and by the touch of the camera which almost fulfills the ideal Astruc once expressed of using the camera as one uses a pen. And it is true that, in their descriptive quality, these films are more literature than theater; but they are also more cinema than literature, and more cinematic than cinema used to be here only a few years ago. Their makers have seen the films of the *Cinémathèque*; they have learned the lessons of the great Russians, lessons which the Russians themselves went on to forget. They have progressed from the generalizing realism dear to the 'thirties and the 'forties, to a realism in which detail is significant and the camera does not hesitate to abandon the *gros plan* for seemingly arbitrary yet essential close-ups of hands or gestures, looking, as it were, no longer with the syn-

thesizing, generalizing eye of a man, but through the eyes of a woman, so much more sensitive to detail.

This new emphasis seems to parallel certain similar tendencies of the modern novel in which, less and less, the author seeks to show the logic of an action or an attitude, but leaves the reader to draw his own conclusions from the surface picture of reality he presents. To *Le Monde* (August 12, 1959) Alexandre Astruc has declared that young directors are moving toward a certain "de-theatralization." They show characters but do not explain them, and their films have nothing to do with any dramatic construction. Thus, the camera, no longer forced to tell an artificially coherent tale, now becomes an eye, confused and irrelevant as in real life, confused by the irrelevant as in real life, ignorant of the real sense of what it perceives, faced by objects and events whose only coherence, really, is furnished by the beholder.

This is very much the manner of Claude Chabrol, whose first two films, made on a shoestring, help to illustrate the strength and the weakness of this approach. Everybody knows by now that *Le Beau Serge* was made with a few million francs that Chabrol's wife inherited one fine day. It is no better for that: the sound, which some people find truer to life, is distinctly odd; some of the characters, hired on the spot, are remarkably wooden (but are not all peasants that way?); and the simplicity of the script provided by Chabrol amounts at times to indifference. Indeed, the essence of it seems to be that it is pointless. A young man returns to his village in the Corrèze to try to regain his health

after a lung illness. From the moment of his arrival he is fascinated by the fate of his childhood chum, Serge, once the village's young man most likely to succeed, who has gone down the drain in his absence, married his mistress when she was going to have a child (born Mongoloid and dead), and taken to drink. His wife pregnant once more, Serge now drinks harder than ever, haunted by the fear of another little Mongol, symbol of his utter futility and failure. The convalescent friend sets out to save Serge, first by freeing him from drink (he fails), then by freeing him from the wife who seems to have driven him to drink (he fails), then by freeing him from the wife's sexy young sister, who also gets a tumble in a while (he fails miserably), and lastly by doing his best to help the baby be born and Serge (who has become a complete sot as a result of his attentions) to see that all is not lost. In this he succeeds at the cost of heroic exertions and, it seems, of his own recovery. Serge, still half drunk, joyfully contemplates his newborn son while his friend slowly collapses by the door. And that is that. But there is no adequate explanation for the obsession, the Serge-fixation, that has led the young hero to so many strenuous and ill-rewarded efforts on his behalf; nor, indeed, of the reasons why an ailing young man should seek his recovery in a dull and dreary village where he has no relative left, where only snow interrupts the rain (or almost), and amusements range no further than from alcohol to alcove.

The photography, which is excellent, shows the place in its unutterable dreariness, heavy skies lowering over drab streets and leprous houses, a world whose liveliest spot is the cemetery. But it is true that men often act for no good reason or none that they can understand; that the explanations we give ourselves and choose to believe are not, as a rule, any stronger or more convincing to the outsider than those of Chabrol's characters; that the heart has its reasons which reason does not know, and that in life "motivation" is often no more than a rationalization after the act. This, Chabrol never forgets and does not intend us to forget—or, rather, since most of us have not thought of it, this is what



LE BEAU SERGE: A saint (J.-C. Brialy) among the infidels (Bernadette Lafont, left, and Gérard Blain, middle).

he wants to demonstrate without ever actually having to say so. Like François Reichenbach, author of so many documentaries on the United States (*New York Ballad*, *Impressions of New York*, *New Orleans Carnival*, *America Through French Eyes*), Chabrol believes in the possibility of making others feel what he feels himself. It is a difficult enterprise, and one that can hope at best only for partial success.

In his second film, *Les Cousins*, Chabrol has, however, done much better, and his greater measure of success is due in large part to a 37-year-old script writer, Paul Gégau, who bids fair to become the Paddy Chayefsky of Paris. Before working with Chabrol on *Les Cousins*, Gégau had written a play and four books that nobody noticed. Now he is suddenly in great demand: he has just finished a script for René Clément, prepares one with Chabrol and another with Vadim, and envisages—again with Chabrol—the screen adaptation of an Ellery Queen mystery. The story which has brought him public notice concerns two cousins who live together while studying in Paris. One is a wild, smooth, madly social *aficionado* of wine, women and sports cars; the other is square, solid and a swot, a dull but decent lad just up from the country who writes long letters home to mother, works hard and, instead of tumbling the girl he likes, writes her a poem and clumsily declares his love. As we expect, the girl ends up in dissolute cousin's bed while solid one plods grimly on to show his worth in the finals. But he does no

better there, for dissolute cousin blinds his examiners with brilliant prattle while he himself, confused by too much reading, fails to pass. In the end, the gun with which he tried to kill his irritatingly lucky cousin goes off while the latter fools with it, and kills the unlucky square on the spot, while we are left to wonder how the poor dissolute will ever get out of this mess.

A morality tale in reverse, but one too intelligent to qualify mere inclination as either virtue or vice. People do what they do because they are what they are: we get no more indication why they are as they are than we would in real life, far less than in Hollywood psychologicals where the development of murderous rapists logically follows from the failure of a nurse to respond to their infant advances; the frigidity of a lovely woman dissolves on the revelation that she was frightened by a *bidet* at the age of three. People are a mess, and the tricks life regularly plays on them and to which they as regularly succumb are an even bigger mess. Though this does not leave us with a particularly illuminating view of life, it seems less confusing than the explanations of more serious and long-winded theorists. Less confusing but, of course, no less confused.

The one who has gone furthest on the road of a new realism in which the screen seeks to reflect the confusions of human mind and comprehension, and who in the process has produced the most important and affecting of the new films, is Alain Resnais. Resnais is known already by his terrible and controversial film on German extermination policies in action, *Nuit et Bruillard*, and by his short films on *Van Gogh*, *Gauguin*, *Guernica*, and other—usually artistic or literary—subjects. In *Hiroshima, mon amour*, Resnais has told with extraordinary evocative power the meeting of two human beings, two strangers—a French actress and a Japanese architect who picks her up one night in a Hiroshima bar. It is impossible to tell the story of this film (the script is by Marguerite Duras) as it is impossible, when asked what one is thinking, to re-create with any meaning or coherence the images passing through one's mind. During the war, during her girlhood at Nevers on the



LES COUSINS: Gérard Blain and (background) Jean-Claude Brialy and Juliette Meynel.

Loire, the woman had loved a German soldier. The soldier had been shot at the Liberation, she had been punished and humiliated for un-French behavior but, worse, she had suffered most terribly in the loss of her love. All this comes back to her in the arms, under the questioning, of her Japanese lover, and the story cannot be said to be told in flashbacks since the moments of past time which she fleetingly recaptures are woven into the Hiroshima night, just as the image of her German lover merges with that of her present one and the sounds of Hiroshima provide the background for her visions of Nevers. As she tries to tell of what had been, she realizes with horror that the memory of those days—of the happiness, the suffering, the horror, the pain—that all this had waned and paled, become as nothing, become as vague and strange as her present love will become under the lash of time. The realization that experience is not only subjective but temporary, that it deflates and withers in time, makes the present seem meaningless and unreal, and fills her with terror.

Like Orpheus, like all of us, she discovers that she cannot look back without dispersing even the pale image of past living and past love, and this seems to question the use of any and every experience. It questions, or merely suggests, other things as well: our human talent for complicating with artificial prejudice and hatreds lives in all conscience difficult enough; the fu-



HIROSHIMA, MON AMOUR: *Emmanuelle Riva.*

tility of war in which human—i.e., personal—realities are more than ever threatened by public nastiness and stupidity; the meaninglessness of racial barriers, as of national ones, when confronted with the real (even though passing, even though condemned) emotion of love. And it leaves one wondering whether the capacity of the human spirit to triumph over most extraordinary difficulties is not itself a function of its shortcomings, of this wearing away of experience.

*Hiroshima* is a troubling, a subversive, film: insidiously, it suggests the futility of public values, the worth and the worthlessness of private ones, the meaninglessness of the most sacred prejudices (nationality, race, emotion, integrity, love), a terrible overweening doubt of everything . . . and yet, in spite of it all, the tremendous importance of the meaning with which we endow every moment. And it says all this in a new language, compounded of camera and commentary, but a commentary that does not run smoothly and logically on as in a trave-

logue, a commentary that is a dialogue of camera and mind responding to each other in disjointed phrases—disjointed, yet with a coherence of their own, something like that of our thought and our vision, something like what the cinema must try to work out if it wants to go much further than it has gone already.

Do the films of the *Nouvelle Vague* have anything in common? If their highest common factor is the excellence of their photography, the lowest common denominator so far has been the thinness of their scripts. Camerawork becomes more than ever the keystone of production, and its predominance explains much else: the insistence on detail, the artistic sensitiveness, the sketchiness of scripts which leave many situations hanging or unexplained, the relative lack of dialogue (“*Les Amants*,” for instance, hardly say a word in fifteen minutes or more), and the heavy use of interior monologue and expressive music. The use of young or unknown actors reflects not principle or prejudice, but the economic conditions under which these beginners began their work some years ago and under which cheap actors were all they could afford.

But most of these once-cheap actors are pretty good and, just as Vadim has made Bardot the only real star in France, so the films of the new directors have revealed new faces destined for success. Most striking among them are Gérard Blain and Jean-Claude Brialy, who act in both of Chabrol's films, and Emanuele Riva, who plays Resnais' heroine with sensitiveness, passion, and a voice that penetrates from mind to marrow.

Even so, as everyone remarks, the stars of the *Nouvelle Vague* are the directors who have gone a long way toward the "cinéast's" dream of being writer-directors and—at least for the moment—when not the producers, then at least the real masters of their work. This may change as success brings capital to their doors and, with it, the little surrenders that cost so much; but for the moment there's no mistaking who's master. The public knows it, too, and no longer goes to see a film with ———, but a film by ———. This has, of course, made for a new sort of snobbery, but it offers an excellent opportunity for "cinema" men, who have grown up with the cinema, who speak its language and have sufficient command of its technique to envisage its development and theirs, it offers the best opportunity they have had yet to do something, to express themselves or, at least, to try to work out means of expression in keeping with an increasingly sophisticated and analytical art.

Certainly the *Nouvelle Vague* is not as new as its publicity has suggested. Its members know better than the public how much a part they are of the general development of the cinema, and how unextraordinary their films really are. *Hiroshima* alone can be called revolutionary in what it tries to do and in what it achieves. There is nothing new in social realism as such, well received by the public a long time ago; also in films long on talent, short of money and, often, short of stars. The difference, though, and it is important, between, say, the films made in Italy after the war and these French films of the last few years is that the former are vivid social criticisms, while the latter (*Hiroshima* again excepted) are more in the tradition of the *roman de mœurs* and make no social, economic or po-

litical comments whatever. Their most noticeable attempts at social documentation concern wild young things who do too much sleeping around (here we might add Marcel Carné's very slick *Les Tricheurs*, the story of amoral and unhappy golden youth living it up to its own destruction), the inhumanity or incomprehension of man for man or man for child (Astruc, Chabrol, Franju, Truffaut), and the private passions of young and old. None of this is new in itself. It is well observed and one discerns an occasional touch of social satire (though neither *Les Tricheurs* nor the films of Tati, where this is most obvious, properly belong to the group); but it makes no comment—certainly none of a political nature. Realism, too, can be escapist. In its self-imposed limits, that of today is very much so. There are, understandably, no films on North Africa, except for a romanesque phantasy, *Goha*, by Jacques Baratier, which I have not seen. But there are none, either, on underpaid workers and shop assistants, nothing like *Umberto D.* on the tragedy of the old and unwanted, nothing like *Miracolo in Milano* about the housing problem, never an attempt to guy the Army let alone to question its pretensions and assumptions, nothing but the most conformist nonsense about an establishment (police, judiciary, etc.) whose competence, gentleness, and sense of justice are hardly beyond question.

The films of the *Nouvelle Vague* keep away from what has become forbidden ground, and in this they reflect a society which has abandoned its decisions to others. Life is incomprehensible, and politics even more so. We concentrate on the immediate, the private, the local, and even there we call chance "fate" and face it with the fascinated acquiescence of a bird dominated by a snake. Man is too small and stupid to do more than look on at what, if it is not his own destruction, must be a sort of pathetic farce. In the end, there are always defeat and death. In adopting this point of view, the new directors, as I said, unwittingly reflect an attitude which, for being more advanced in France, is no less noticeable elsewhere. Indeed, it is hard to say whether the popular simplicity of certain Anglo-Saxon "explanations" is not more dreadful than



the abdication of any right to explanation at all. It may be that the concentration on action and technique, at the cost of explanation and motivation in the work of French directors, is itself a sort of avoidance of content, a begging the question even, and that on this plane they meet their less advanced brethren elsewhere.

But it is characteristic that, of all of them, the one who had most to say about forbidden things like war and peace, atom bombs and human suffering, is also the one who has, in effect, said most, and most interestingly, in (and about) the cinematic idiom itself. Perhaps what Resnais understood (consciously or not) is that the prob-

lem today rests in the synthesis of man's personal and social concerns. Social criticism is good for a book, and so is adultery, and so is first love. But in life they go together, mixed as the elements of a cake; for those who live them are men and women, complex and complicated, hungry and happy and apprehensive at the same time, working and loving and buying a newspaper and shooting a glance at a passing blonde all at the same time. A slice of reality—since that is all the artist can hope to cope with—a slice of reality is a slice of a mixture, not the artificial isolation of one of its many components.

## Qu'est-ce que la Nouvelle Vague?

NOEL BURCH

Originally, the term *nouvelle vague*, as popularized by the snappy, left-wing weekly *l'Express*, did not refer to the cinema at all, but to the generation of forward-looking youth (mostly professional people, business men, and students) who were supposed to gather 'round Mendès-France and bring new ideas into French political life. Subsequent events have, unfortunately, emptied the phrase of most of its social and political meaning, leaving a handy catch-word in the air when it came time to put a label on the truly remarkable movement which began in French films last year—in the sudden rise of a sizable number of amazingly young directors (the *average* age of the directors discussed in this article is 32). In films, however, the new wave is primarily a commercial phenomenon, and only incidentally an idealistic one. At the Cannes stock-market last spring, the French producer who did not have his young Frenchman to sell was simply wasting his time; foreign distributors were interested in almost no other commodity, and they paid some pretty fancy prices. One is reminded of the run on Italian neorealism just after the war. But, unlike the first neorealist films, those

of the new wave are just as popular at home as abroad: a half dozen of the biggest first-run houses in Paris have been tied up fairly regularly for the last six months by the new generation. Just how, one may wonder, did this state of affairs come about?

In the first place, the older generation was undoubtedly beginning to show serious signs of fatigue; their films were costing more and more and, with a very few brilliant exceptions, were bigger and bigger flops; moreover a certain generation of actors no longer interested the public. (In France the tendency to use the same actors over and over again is stronger, perhaps, than in any other country—a tendency to which the new directors are no exception.) In the face of this situation, a few producers and a few young directors (most of them with private fortunes) decided that the time was ripe to start making those films that they (the directors, of course) had been wanting to make for so long, *and to make them cheaply*. As in every Western country, film-making in France is far too costly; it is an industry which tolerates a form of conspicuous consumption and even downright waste which simply could not exist